



DEVOTIONAL TIME

11-20-2014 @ 0900

"Loving Tough" When Loving is Tough!

Acts 7:54-60

SET MY SPIRIT FREE

Set my spirit free, that I may worship Thee!
Set my spirit free, that I may praise Thy Name!
Let all bondage go, and let deliverance flow!
Set my spirit free to worship Thee!

Acts 7:54-60

"As the members of the Council listened to Stephen, they became furious and ground their teeth at him in anger. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to Heaven and saw God's Glory, and Jesus standing at the right side of God. 'Look!' he said. 'I see Heaven opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right side of God!' With a loud cry, the Council members covered their ears with their hands. Then they all rushed at him at once, threw him out of the city, and stoned him. The witnesses left their cloaks in the care of a young man named Saul. They kept on stoning Stephen as he called out to the Lord, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!' He knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord! Do not remember this sin against them!' He said this and died. And Saul approved of his murder."

QUESTIONS FOR TODAY

- Can you think of some person or group who has hurt you so badly you still find it difficult (if not *impossible*) to forgive them? Who's the real victim of this bitter state?
- Can you think of some person or group whom you have hurt so badly they will neither forgive nor forget, even if you would give anything to "heal the breach" that has arisen between you?
- Have you ever known a "healing" of a broken relationship, (family, friend, co-worker,) that left you wonderstruck at the generosity of your "forgiver"? How did that mercy make you feel?

Stephen is astonishing! What an amazing ability to be merciful! Can you imagine facing a murderous crowd, being able to ask God's forgiveness on the very people who are bashing you with big rocks, all meaning to kill you *to please God*? Pretty incredible, right? Mercy seems much more "selective" in our world. Isn't it amazing how we willingly forgive certain people for almost anything, yet refuse to forgive others for smaller slights, no matter what? What explains such a "difference"? Is there some mysterious bond between manifest mercy and a "loving" heart? Selfless Love is the driving force behind "biblical" forgiveness in every situation. The reason we desire to be forgiven of our own transgressions is our love for ourselves. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus commands that we love our neighbor as ourselves, assuming that we love ourselves whether we choose to admit it or not. So the very reason we "have trouble" forgiving others lies in our *lack of love* for them. Our lack of love for those around us demonstrates a lack of knowledge regarding God's Love for us all. I John 4:8 affirms: "He that doesn't love doesn't know God, for God is Love." Therefore, if we do not find enough love within us to forgive someone, we do not truly *know God* yet. The reason Stephen's mercy baffles us is that we still need to grow our "knowledge of God" to appreciate the power of His Love. Through the Love of God, Stephen held so much love for others within him he couldn't hate them, even as they mutilated his body in the midst of their anger. Instead of hating them Stephen's heart was breaking for them, and he found himself praying for them even as they were killing him. This is "loving tough" when loving is tough! God, grant us the Grace of Loving Tough! By the infilling of Your Holy Spirit, make us ready to release all our hate, let go of our grudges, and engage Your amazing Love and awesome Forgiveness, especially to those who hurt us most! Help us grow willing to go "all in" for Jesus Christ, the "Merciful One"! He loved us "tough"; in Him, we'll love others with such toughness!